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Walter E. Corbin
Florence, Mass.

FAREWELL SERMON,

PREACHED BY

REV. W. K. PIERCE,

TO THE

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

OF

BRIMFIELD, MASS.,

May 3, 1878.



HOLYOKE, MASS.:

TRANSCRIPT JOB PRINTING HOUSE, 182 HIGH STREET.

1878.



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SERMON.

“For we walk by faith, not by sight. * * * Wherefore we labor that whether present or absent we may be accepted of him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” II Cor. 5 : 7-10.*

Saint Paul here gives the motives that actuated him in his labors. He was working that he might please God and be prepared for judgment ; and these two motives form together the noblest ambition that can actuate men. This is walking by faith, not by sight ; to live with eternal results in view, as ever under the watching eye of God, and in all that we do, do it well and freely and joyously, because it will please God. This spirit and purpose put into life will ennoble and dignify it. There is nothing trivial or mean that has this spirit in it. There is nothing so small but that this will make it great ; there is nothing so humble but that this will make it noble. We should estimate the value of all things, of our position in life, our employment, our deeds and words, our influence, by the standards of God's acceptance and the immortality of all work that he approves ; in this way, may we learn the splendid lesson of contentment in our appointed station and

sphere and endowments ; however humble they may be measured by worldly standards, or however far beneath our early aspirations and hopes.

And if we have this motive, this purpose and ambition that actuated the great Apostle, as the inspiring spirit of our labors and life, we shall receive the baptism of Divine energy. There is no such prolific source of power and help. If we could only have this thought of God watching and approving, and of eternity and the judgment coming, as the central spirit and purpose of life, what energy would come tiding into our being ! What a Bar it would furnish against all temptations to selfishness and indolence. How nobly we could live, what work we could accomplish if we thus could "walk by faith, not by sight," pressing in to the realm of unseen influences, and clasping the unseen Omnipotent hand.

It is not inappropriate that I should on this occasion speak more of myself and my work than I am accustomed to do. The nature of the occasion, that which makes this Sabbath and this morning's service a significant one, the history of the events that have led up to the final necessity, and the imperative legal decision, all these you know as well as I, and I need not speak of them. When I first came here I laid out my plans of preaching and labor, certain grand lines of operation ; certain central plans, and these with minor changes, with varied illustrations, and varied methods of presentation and forms of application as your situation and characters and needs became unveiled to me, these general lines and plans I have held to and followed throughout. Within the last eight months I have repeated word for word, sermons that I preached to you during the first two years of my labors among you. I have from the first, tried not to spare you in your sins. I have tried to faithfully and uncompromisingly, and regardless of consequences to myself, cause you to see yourselves as I saw you. I have tried to make you

realize that God's eye was upon you, and God's judgment before you. I have tried to make you measure yourselves by high standards, so that you might be shamed and startled and convicted by your unworthiness and sinfulness, and turn to God for pardon and help.

I have ever felt that the grandest theme of all was Divine love. I have felt that to be illimitable and beyond the possibility of exaggeration, that it was the great healing, saving power, for the comfort, the inspiration and salvation of men. I dare not say anything to throw a shadow over that bright disk of love. I would as soon darken the sun in the heavens.

I have recognized the power of the stern side of truth for startling and bringing about reflection, the awful, inexorable nature of retribution, the terrors of the law ; but I have ever been convinced that these can only move men a little way, that fear and dread and caution as motives, must give way to gratitude and love, before any great advancement, any thorough, effective reformation can be accomplished.

It has been my belief that servile natures are moved by fear and the noble by love, and it has seemed to me, my own heart full of faith in the might and power of love, that I could and must be able by God's help, to so make this truth of Divine Fatherhood and of the Cross, glow and burn before you, that it would awaken your slumbering natures, and appeal with effectiveness to every noble and generous trait, to every element indeed, of manhood and womanhood within you ; and I have faith to believe, that in many cases where I cannot see, where only He who reads the heart can see, it has had such results. I have deemed love to be the central theme of the Scriptures, the chief feature of the Cross, the grand, comprehensive disposition, heart and nature of God. "And when ye pray, say 'Our Father.' " "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." "God is love." And these are the most sugges-

tive of all the parables, of the woman searching for the lost coin ; the shepherd going over the mountains for the lost sheep ; and the father hurrying to meet and welcome the returning prodigal.

It is our knowledge of Christ's love for us that makes us love him. It is this knowledge that inspires all prayer. We know that God loves us or we could not pray to him. Our assurance of Divine help and of our acceptance and salvation, rests on our knowledge of God's love. That is the glorious column about which all confidence, all prayer and faith, all hope and love, twine vine-like from earth to heaven. Men want faith in Christ, they want to believe that he will forgive, answer and save. How can they believe this save in one way, by seeing and realizing the Divine love for them. Men want comfort, sympathy and support, all these gifts the Christian finds in God ; and he receives them and they are made real to him, just in proportion to his realization of God's love. Love is thus the sun in the Christian's heaven, for this reason I have from the first, held the theme of Divine love to be, the one grand theme including all others, overarching all others.

While speaking to the impenitent, I have not forgotten the Christian. I look upon conversion as the beginning of a new life. We are to become conformed unto the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to be transfused with his spirit and have a character like 'His' developed within us, and no one can ever meet with such a change as that in an hour or a year. No one should stop and sit down when he enters the gateway. There is a long journey to God before him. The Christian's life is a warfare, and he who is converted enlists in that war, and from thenceforth commits himself to battles and marches, and there is no discharge from that war in this life. I have felt it my duty to not alone solace the Christian in his happy condition, as redeemed and saved, but to startle him out of all disposition to slumber by the way. Not alone to portray to

him the joy and sweetness of the Christian's life, but to also start within him holy ambition to cultivate those qualities of character and disposition and habits, that are the only healthful and perpetual sources of such sweet experiences. I have sought to stimulate him to higher attainments, to make him dissatisfied with what he is and has, and quicken within him aspirations after still nobler heights of faith and practice. Moreover, I have ever felt that the Christians and the church are preachers, that their lives are preaching all the time. And while realizing and urging upon those who have not found religion, the solemn truth, that they are alone responsible to God and that no excuse as to the imperfect way the professors are living, can avail them at the Divine Bar, or lift from them in the least, the separate obligation that belongs to each one to follow Christ and become a Christian, though every man in the church were a Judas, I have also recognized the fact that men do and will look to professors, and that much of that spiritual power that arouses men to a conviction of religious duty, lies in the lives of the church members, and that much that retards the good work lies in their defection; that the outside community of unbelievers are and must inevitably be won or repelled from Jesus Christ, by the consistency or inconsistency of those professing to follow Him. And I have also felt that the true religion of Jesus is a practical power in heart and life, that not only all lack of prayerfulness and devotional spirit, but all lack morally, all narrowness and bigotry and meanness, all unfaithfulness to conscience, all avarice, all selfishness, all dishonesty, all that is uncharitable or quarrelsome, all that is wrong and contrary to the spirit and life of the Master, is that anti-christ which it is the mission of faith and the cross and the Holy Spirit to bring men out of,—to redeem and save them from. With these ideas in mind, I have endeavored to not spare the Christians in warning, in criticism, in appeal, in efforts to emphasize the practi-

cal side of faith, the vital meaning and efficiency of it in educating, broadening, and in every way elevating human nature.

And in these views and purposes, it seems to me that I have found sanction in the Gospel. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of Heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in Heaven." "He that hath not the spirit of Christ is none of his." "Ye are the light of the world." "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven." "And He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

A revival of religion occurs in a community, and all clearly note the work done, but there is work that does not thus write its results so that all eyes can read. I have never been one of those who have a feverish hunger, a restless longing for a revival. It is a blessed, blessed thing indeed, to have the grand outpouring of God's spirit, to see a whole community stirred, and souls flocking to Christ, but I believe God's spirit may be present in power, and yet not manifest itself in that way, working not by a sudden wave of power but slowly, gradually working where we cannot trace swift marvelous results. In a community like this, made up largely of a settled, staid, intelligent class of people, with no manufactories, no business to call in a floating population, it need not cause us to question the presence of God or His blessing attending Christian prayers and efforts, it need not cause us to be discouraged or faint-hearted, or feverishly impatient if the spirit does not work by a sudden, mighty wave of religious in-

terest ; there may be a quieter, slower work going on and where we cannot take out our note-book and write down day by day, week by week, name after name of suddenly awakened converts.

There is no more glorious, blessed place on earth than the inquiry-room during a revival. To see the recruits flocking to the blood-stained banner of Calvary, to hear the new voices anxiously inquiring the way and then joyfully proclaiming that they have found it. Why, a man whose soul is in sympathy with Christ's cause, who has labored and prayed for years and carried a great burden, the burden of pity and sorrow and anxiety for the impenitent, for such an one to stand in the revival inquiry-meeting and see neighbor after neighbor, friend after friend, companion, brother, sister, parent, child, come to the cross and find the Savior and proclaim Him with a loving heart and shining face, that is to get about as near to heaven as any place you can find on earth. But I believe that the Holy Spirit of God works in other ways. A timely word spoken, or act that shows to another that you are interested in the welfare of that other's soul, will sometimes, even years after bring that one to the cross. Blessed be that tenacity, that vitality which a word even sometimes possesses, which the spirit uses long after for the saving of the hearer. Many a Christian dates years back the beginning of serious reflection, the first falling into his nature of the spark that afterwards bursts into flame. There are many natures that come slowly to conviction and repentance. They seem to grow up gradually into the kingdom. Then there is a work of education of character building that is not conversion, but which makes the Christian when he is converted, a stronger, nobler, more consistent Christian. To the one who finally becomes a Christian there is nothing lost, no culture, no discipline, no element of moral or mental growth, these all tell after conversion, they all help to determine the quality of his piety after he experiences

the great change. If you are going to reconstruct a house you throw away the decayed and useless material, but all the good timber is so much gained, and the strength of the building depends upon the character of the timber out of which it is built. The man who is broad of mind, sound in moral fibre, with rich sympathies and affections, becomes as a little child and enters the kingdom of heaven; becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus. Every one of those excellent qualities of head and heart that he possessed before, enter into that formation of a new man like sound timbers into a reconstructed building.

The Apostle Paul enumerates the qualities or elements of character, which are to be developed in the Christian life. He calls them the fruits of the spirit, and notice what these fruits are. There is "love," part of this is love to man; "peace," part of the meaning of peace here, is a peaceable disposition towards others the opposite of quarrelsomeness, irritability, vindictiveness, fault finding; "long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith," part of the meaning of the word faith here is faithfulness, fidelity to conscience, honor. Then there is "meekness, temperance," that is purity of habit and self-control in all things. And the Apostle says that against these there is no law, in so far as one has these qualities, he is not under the condemnation of these laws of God and his own being; so far as he is true to these principles he is approved and not condemned by the Infinite Judge. So far as these go, so far as he possesses these he is approved.

Now many and many a man who is only a moralist, that is, who has not become a converted man and learned to love God, has a rich store of these. He has not by faith come under the direct influence and power of the Divine Spirit, but when, if at all, he does come under that influence, it is just these moral qualities, these graces that are part of the fruits of that Spirit; are part of the work of that Spirit, working in him to

make his disposition and character Christlike. All these elements, these fruits, these moral traits are indispensable to the highest Christian life. All deficiencies here in these points of character, must be made up before he comes to the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ, and all possessions, all attainments in these points of character that he has before conversion, are so much gained and make him so much more noble a Christian, and add so much to the quality of his piety when he becomes a converted man.

“Finally, brethren,” says the Apostle, “whatsoever things are true ; whatsoever things are honest ; whatsoever things are pure ; whatsoever things are lovely ; whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things.” In the light of this thought then, it seems to me to be incontrovertibly true that all work of teacher or preacher or parent that tends to elevate men, to make them pure or temperate, or honest or kind, or true or generous, to make them better fathers and mothers and neighbors and friends, to cultivate within them the social graces and the moral virtues, to help and inspire them to put off evil habits and put on good habits ; that tends to elevate and develop human nature in any way, in any degree, is a high work though not the highest, and its results are grand though not the grandest. It is the work of the Master though not the chief work—a part of the labors of the Lord himself were exactly of this nature. He went about, not always converting souls but doing good. In His sympathy and moral precepts, in His rebuke of all that was low, selfish, untrue, in His words and example, making men dissatisfied with their dispositions and characters, and quickening within them aspirations to be better, he spent much of His time without direct effort to lead men to the Father, and without immediate conversions resulting from them. This is true also of the ministry and teaching of the Apostles. We seem to have here,

the very highest sanction upon the truth that all labors for the blessing and benefit of men, in any form or degree, in any point of character or need, are worthy of our best efforts, and the attendant results are noble and glorious.

I have feelings of sadness here, to-day. I came among you oppressed with a sense of the greatness of my mission, the vast and almost awful responsibility of my position, and my own weakness and littleness. I had had but little experience in my calling. It was my first settled pastorate and I had many misgivings. As my heart sank, I felt ever my utter impotency alone to carry the weight put upon me and to cry more mightily to God for help, and to lean more heavily upon the Divine arm. I have made many mistakes, I have learned many things from the lips of the stern teacher, failure. There have doubtless, been golden opportunities for speaking the word or doing the deed that would have helped you, chances which I have not met or improved as I should have done. But I wish to here give in my testimony to the efficiency of Divine aid in my work. Whatever I may have done that has been well or wisely done, whatever in my official or social connection with you I may have done that has comforted or cheered or inspired you, that will cause you to remember me with any pleasure or gratitude, whatever I may have succeeded in doing in the way of giving you new or inspiring views of duty and God and heaven, in all my success, little or much, among you, the Divine Spirit, not I, has done it. I am nothing, my heavenly Father is everything. When I was strong and thought of self and what I could do, then was I weak; and when I was conscious of weakness and looked to God for help, was I strong.

I feel sad when I think that I may never enter this desk again. It is a hallowed place to me. And this room, every point and feature of it made familiar and dear by all these years of association, your up-turned

faces, quick with sympathy and confidence, the quietness, wakefulness and even eagerness with which you have listened, the seats yonder and the faces of the singers, even the strong high winds with their howlings and dirges, and the familiar rattle of blinds and windows, it seems to me that I shall carry these scenes all away with me, and for many years they will linger by me, sacred, dear memories, if indeed they ever fade away.

I feel sad when I think that my work here is broken. My plans and purposes, the laying out of my work, plannings and anticipations reaching onward to far-off consummations, the sowings for far-off harvests, all these features of a pastor's work and life among his people, I realize to be broken here and now. I can do but little more for you ; a few more weeks and it is over forever. It is slow work getting hold of men and women. It takes a long time to press one's way to the inner sanctuary of their affection and confidence, to learn what they are and what they need, and then to bring in to them the Divine truth, its comfort, its warning and inspiration. I feel as though this great work had been but just begun. I am like one who goes into his field, makes his plans, brings his implements and goes to work, and when he has but just begun to plow and to sow, the winter comes and stops it all. I feel as one might who had commenced to build on a large scale with a grand ideal, and who, when the foundation was laid and a little of the walls gone up, was suddenly taken away from his labors. I feel as a sculptor might who enters his studio and begins to work, he has a beautiful statue in his mind, he strikes a few blows, a feature, an eye, a hand begin to appear, and then paralysis seizes him, his arms hang stricken and it is over.

But one thing is true, I cannot now and perhaps shall never in this world see all the good that God may have most graciously permitted me to do. This is the

view I take of it, and I find comfort in the reflection. Much of the results of our influence for evil over others is concealed from us. Those whom we have injured morally by word or example, do not often walk up to us and confront us with the mischief we have done. It may be that they will, hereafter; if so, such unveilings of the baleful power of our lives on others, such knowledge of what we have been doing in all these years of blurred vision and ignorance, and the reflections of quickened conscience upon it, may well be imagined as one of the most terrific elements in the agony of the lost souls. The reverse of this, is equally true. We cannot measure our influence for good. No man knows how far his light has shone. Many a word or look or act passed from memory, has had, all unknown to us, its blessed mission.

Many a preacher, in the truth that he presents to others, wields a power over them which he little imagines, when in great weakness, and at times, himself only feebly realizing the force and meaning of what he says, he speaks the words, and as he notes little indication of response among the people and little apparent effect, he would be cast down and discouraged, were he not stayed up by the reflection that it is God's truth, and that He uses and directs it in His own way and time. Of some of our sowing, God permits us soon to see the results, but much of it as it falls from our scattering hand, sinks out of sight and we watch in vain for years, for the green shoot breaking the soil; and yet, it does take root and comes to the light, and waves in the harvests all the same, though our eyes may never in this world be blessed by the sight of it. "They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy." "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." Spiritual effects are subtle, and cannot be followed and watched like material influences, and material labor and results. He

who builds ships and houses, can watch his work and trace the results of every blow ; he who goes forth to plant his field, can mark the processes of development and growth ; he who undertakes to carve a statue or paint a picture, can every night drop his tools and stand back and view his work, but he who goes forth to build human characters, to sow the seed of Divine truth in the soul, he who goes forth to the great work of chiseling the Divine image out of the marble of human nature, is working in a more subtle realm. His encouragement must largely be drawn, not from present sight, not from vision at night of what he has done through the day, not from vision in the waving fields of autumn of what he has done through the summer, not from that which he sees as death draws near, of what his life's labor has been, but rather, from faith in the unfailing promises of God, faith in the omnipotence of His truth, faith in the revelations of the eternal world.

But I find comfort in the present sight and positive knowledge of good that I have done. You have come to me many of you, with glistening eye and warm hand-clasp, and told me how I have helped you. You have told me that I had helped you to a knowledge of your own sins and failings and imperfections, and helped give you inspiration to a better, nobler life ; that I have made more real and vivid to you, the truths of faith and love of Christ and religion. You have called me in, many of you, in your time of sadness when death was in the house ; and when at such times, feeling painfully how little I could do, I have in a feeble way tried to point you to the cross and the precious truths and thoughts, that hover about it of the Father and the Comforter and immortality, you have thanked me, and I knew that the words came from your hearts. There are many such evidences and testimonials that you have given me, that are very precious. They have come home to me every one, and done me good. I have had many happy hours here, and many things to

please and gratify me, but in and through it all, there has been nothing that has begun to give me the happiness that such words have given me. They lie in memory more fragrant than flowers, sweeter than music. I shall not forget these things in all my life, and I know that in the other world they will be more precious to me than ever. And then the friends that I have made here. There are hours of serious reflection, of true vision, when things assume to our eyes something of their real value. We seem at such times to hold scales like those which Addison dreamed about. He dreamed that a pair of golden scales hung by a golden chain over the table that stood before him, and, on a sudden, there were great heaps of weights thrown down on each side of them; weights which showed the value of everything that is in esteem among men. It seems to me that such balances are before me now. It seems to me that there is one bright little weight, which thrown into the scales is heavier than many other things. It is human friendship. It is sad to lose our property and health. It is even sadder to lose one's friends. He who toils all day and half the night to gain money, accumulates and becomes rich; he who wins friends though poor in this world's goods, may be the richer man of the two. When on that winter morning four years ago, I came over the circling brim of hills from the north and west, and looked down for the first time upon this clean picturesque little village, I felt lonesome. It was all strange to me. I did not know a single face or name, I had never heard a single voice. I am richer now than I was then, I have accumulated a great deal since then, I have found a mine here and it has yielded me gold. I have gained what is far more valuable than anything material and perishable, a whole heart-full of warm true friends. I know what it is to have true friends, and you know. Empty and poverty-stricken and wretched must he be who does not know it. There is one Friend truer than all others. He

will be to you and to me if we love him more than all, more than the dearest and mightiest can ever be.

Many changes have come to you since I first came. Many of you are more wrinkled and older than you were four years ago. Little infants in the cradle then, now run with stout young feet. Many of you have seen sad times, and there are vacant seats now which were filled then. Life is full of these changes and the finger of decay and death is busy. These things teach us all that we cannot rely upon the things of this world, and that a steady resistless hand is pressing us on to eternity. There are dangers and mistakes here, disease and trouble and disappointment, and the breaking up of home circles, and misunderstandings and estrangements. These are all stirred in with both the bright and pleasant features. The great lesson for us all is "Be ye also ready." If we are ready then, we know toward what we are moving slowly onward. "And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying," broken love circles shall be re-united, never to break again ; estrangements shall be forgotten ; mistakes shall be rectified, for "We shall know each other better when the mists have rolled away."





